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THE POEM AND THE PRINTED PAGE¹

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It is not infrequently the case, in these days, that one hears the assertion that the average man reads little or no poetry. A mere cursory investigation reveals the startling truth of the statement, while an extended study establishes an additional fact, namely, that poetry formerly read has been largely forgotten. Poetry, not only in the lives of average men, but also in the lives of teachers and college students, is apparently ceasing to be a vital force. Except as something vaguely remembered from past school days it has lost its power.

Yet poetry in some form springs from a primal and persistent instinct of man, and its influence ought to be as potent today as it ever was. Its most characteristic mark is emotion, an actor that has always taken the capital rôle on the stage of human affairs. It has been said that by imagination man makes his every advance, whether it be in art or elsewhere. This statement does not represent the whole truth, for without emotion as a yokefellow imagination can make no great advance. It is through emotion that man secures all his finer experiences and by its urging he achieves all his great deeds. And while it is true that imagination arouses emotion, it is also true that an impassioned soul awakens the

¹A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English at Richmond, Virginia, February 28, 1914.

imagination, in which state one hears whisperings not common to the dull spirit and becomes the creator of beauteous forms and far-shining truths of which poetry is the embodiment.

The intellect of the race wins its way slowly into the unknown through the scientist or the philosopher, who in his lonely study or laboratory toils incessantly. Such is an Edison or an Aristotle. But it is through the poet that the race makes its advances into the mysterious and subtle and more significant field of the emotions. It is he that reveals to us the truth of the soul. He is "the leader in the dance of life." In the primitive dancing horde every man was a poet, moved by an impulse which now as then is universal: "from the emotional urgency of life no one can escape." "Do we not all have such moments, so charged with emotion that we seem taken out of ourselves, so filled with intensity of life that we feel unconscious—moments when new truths come with a physical flash on the eye, when perceptions of beauty illuminate the soul with sudden and ample glory, when emotions of love expand the spirit and pour it abroad—and then comes darkness, and we fail from out the mood; but yet do not altogether fail, for the memory of the truth stays with us, that beauty has illuminated all our days, those emotions of love have expanded the heart forever; it is on the memory of such moments that we live."¹

If poetry is worth while it ought to be a vital force in the lives of men, not of a few specially fine-tempered beings, but in the great mass of humanity. It has been so in the past. The far-reaching thought, the flashing imagery, and the primal passions of mankind have found their best and most enduring expression in poetry. The fact that real art endures is perhaps the most distinguishing thing about it. Kings depart, the great physical works of man crumble, even mountains disappear, but the songs of a people endure. Notwithstanding catastrophes of all sorts, catastrophes which destroy manuscripts, civilizations, and even peoples, the supreme thought or fancy or emotion is preserved—that insight of the race into the significance of the human soul which by common consent is reckoned the one thing priceless.

Poetry is losing its force in modern life because we no longer know it. This may seem a strange statement as one considers the

¹ Woodberry, *The Inspiration of Poetry*.

millions of children attending the primary and grammar grades and the youth in our high schools and colleges. Multitudes of edited volumes thrust themselves upon us everywhere, and it would appear impossible to escape their virus. In order to do so, to continue the figure, it would seem necessary to be inoculated with some sort of antitoxin. And yet, if one will but carry on a little investigation he will be impressed anew with the ability of the minds of our young people to resist the acquisition of poetry.

I think it safe to say that in the past no body of verse has been so potent in our early years as the Mother Goose melodies. They have literally sung their way into our souls. These melodies have become a part of us and their fancies are among our dearest treasures. Most of their characters are primal types and exemplify some of the deepest ethical truths. Their meters are at times as complicated as will be met with, and what could be more perfect or more beautiful in its alliteration, its cadence, and its melody than

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocketful of rye;
Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie.

When the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing;
Was not that a dainty dish
To set before the king?

It is inconceivable that these immortal melodies can ever be lost, but it is conceivable that they may lose much of their potency. It is only recently that I have been trying some experiments with sixty Freshmen in our university, which is a co-educational institution. I had suspected from the way in which they read, answered questions, or attempted to quote, that poetry was for them, by and large, merely a thing of the printed page. The result of a test on the Mother Goose melodies was pitiable to see. Such inaccuracies as the following were rife:

Hey diddle
The cat and the fiddle
And the dish ran away with the spoon
The little dog laughed to see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Another attempt at the same poem:

Hey diddle
The cat and the fiddle
The cow jumped over the moon
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

A typical paper, and one equal in merit to the majority written, is the following:

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cubbard
To get her poor dog a bone
When she got there the cubbard was bare.

Goosy Goosy Gander
Where do you wander?
Up town and down town
And in my mothers chamber.

Old King Sol was a merry old soul
And a merry old sol was he.

Sing a song of six pence
A pocketful of rye
Four and twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie
When the pie was opened.

Little Tom Thumb, Sitting in a corner
Eating his Christmas pie.

Along came a spider
And sat down along sider.

To summarize briefly: The average number of poems attempted by the students was between four and five, and rarely was there more than one in a paper that was written accurately. A large number failed to reproduce a single poem completely and correctly, while two students out of the sixty could not write even a line of Mother Goose. The sense of meter and rhythm was almost totally lacking and in most cases all the essential feeling for the significant things in poetry was absent. There are plenty of Mother Goose melodies in books—the world is full of them—but they are melodies on the printed page and not in the lives of the growing generation.

Where such a knowledge of Mother Goose melodies displays itself one would suspect something similar in regard to the poetry

usually read in the grades and in the high school. No student of the sixty was unable to give some sort of quotation. These were mostly single lines or small groups of lines. A typical paper is the following:

I'LL PENSEROSO

Come pensive Nun devout and pure,
Sober steadfast and demure.

—Milton.

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day;
Shall fold their tents like Arabs,
And as silently steal away.

—Longfellow.

Once upon a midnight dreary
As I pondered weak and weary
Over many quaint and curious volume
Of forgotten lore.

—Poe.

Friends, Romans and countrymen
lend me your ears.

I come to bury Caesar not to
praise him.

The evil that men do lives
after them,

The good is oft interred with their bones.

In several instances a few doggerel or burlesque verses were all that the memory retained, and in three cases only could students write correctly complete poems. Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" was reproduced twice and "My Madonna," by Robert W. Service, once. Where such conditions obtain poetry will never be very vital in the lives of men and women.

It may be mere triteness to call to mind that poetry was originally sung, then chanted, and then read aloud with full emphasis on the rhythm. In these days we are urged to be natural, to be colloquial, to avoid laying bare the metrical scheme. In the comparatively rare instances when poetry is read aloud or recited its fundamental quality is suppressed. Usually it is read silently and there is no attempt to make audible to the inner ear the "purposed march and cadence of its lines." A major part of the study in the

upper grades, in the high school, and in college has a tendency to make us forget what poetry is. There should be a return to the oral presentation of verse, a return that is in keeping with the modern playground movement, the outdoor pageant, and oral composition. We must retrace our steps in the teaching of poetry. Not only the imagery and the emotion must be appreciated, but we must make manifest the melody and the cadence by oral reading; we must follow the exhortation of our own Longfellow when he says,

And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

At home, by the fireside, in the school, in public everywhere, let poetry be read as *verse*, not as technical meter, not as sing-song, but still not lacking in an element of chant, an element that does justice to the rhythm and the harmony of the poem.

Following immediately the elemental melodies of Mother Goose as the poetry of first import in our national life, the poetry of the Bible should receive an important place in our educational scheme. The average college student's acquaintance with this book is a standing joke and his accurate knowledge of any part of it is almost a negligible quantity. The Lord's Prayer is about the only poem in the Bible that one may expect a majority of students to know. The Psalms, those great exemplars of the "trials, agonies, hates, loves, and adorations" of man, are for the most part a name. The twenty-third in a measure holds its own, but the rest of them, to use a notable phrase, have sunk into "innocuous desuetude." Scarcely a trace of the Sermon on the Mount and the great chapter on Charity is to be found in students' memories. That poem in the Bible called Ecclesiastes, with its magnificent gloom and spiritual light, with its testimony that all except the fear of God is vanity, should be heard, not merely seen. Like the toll of some great bell ringing through the ages has been the "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." This is the climax of emotional song, and its pathos, so intensive as to be almost painful, must be sounded in order to produce its full effect.

I cannot leave this phase of my subject without mentioning another religious book which is primarily poetic and which has

been a vital force in English-speaking races second to the Bible only. I refer to the Liturgy of the Anglican church. Of course it can hardly be urged that its study be made universal, and yet the church that makes it an indispensable part of its service utilizes a power of incalculable magnitude. Long ago Mr. Stedman paid it his highest tribute in such terms as the following: "The creative faith of the poet"; "one of the few world-poems"; "the most wonderful symphonic idealization of human faith"; "the voice of human brotherhood, the blended voice of rich and poor, old and young, the wise and the simple, the statesman and the clown"; "as a work of poetic art it is unparalleled"; "lyrical from first to last with perfect and melodious forms of human speech"; "as a piece of inclusive literature it has no counterpart and can have no successor." It is "vocal as a Memnon in the rising sun" and still makes its ineffable appeal to its votaries through the sense of sound. Fortunate is the church that finds its fundamental faith imbedded in its harmonious numbers and whose clergymen know how to read it.

Sir Philip Sidney once remarked: "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet." In that statement he touched upon the vital point in the effectiveness of poetry: it must be *heard*. The printed page is able to impress the thought and the form, but the melody and the cadence must be sounded, and these are the things which touch the emotion and enliven the imagery. Silent reading of poetry is artificial and becomes a marvelous delight only when the subtle harmonies of the verse pulse through the reader's soul and his inward ear catches its stately tread or tripping measures. This comes only after the proper training in song, or chant, or rhythmic presentation.

An adequate measure of life is to be found largely in the intensity of its emotional states. The emotional states that are of permanent value invariably take form in deeds or some kind of art, and the ultimate process in any art is expression. There is no excuse or reason for its being unless it takes form. The impassioned thoughts of men find their most durable utterance in poetry, a concrete expression of truth that never grows old or out of date. It satisfies

the cravings of its own age and looks toward the future as well. All poetry of high rank is essentially ethical and it should impel us incessantly and continually to nobler and finer sentiments than we experience in everyday life.

Poetry fails largely to do this because we have not made it our own. It is a thing of the printed page rather than a part of us. From the kindergarten through the grammar school, the high school, and the college, children and young people should be required to learn by heart scores of the immortal lyrics and highly dramatic passages of the great plays. This process should be surrounded as far as possible with play, delight, acting, and such accessories, but it should be pursued also as work. The theory that children must never be made to do things irksome to them is to my mind nonsense. For their own good they must be taught many things, whether they like them or not. The one thing, I believe, in which modern education has been most negligent is in the training of the emotions. Our passions instinctively seek expression, and we should have ever present with us, at the instant the mood is upon us, the means of relief and comfort. In the moment of hopelessness and despair we instinctively chant the glorious words, from beginning to end, "The Lord is my Shepherd." In like manner, we ought to have at command poems to satisfy the multitude of emotional needs from the prattling joys of childhood to the agonies of death. When the battle of life goes against us and all seems lost, Clough's ringing lines should give us new courage:

Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labor and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;
It may be in yon smoke concealed,
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,
And, but for you, possess the field.

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.

When fortune flies and the world's scorn rests upon us we may seek refuge in friendship and Shakespeare's Twenty-ninth Sonnet. And when the sunset crimsones the evening sky and long shadows stretch across the land as twilight falls, the aspirations of our souls may well find expression in Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar."

In order to have this ideal transmuted into the lives of children and youth we must have teachers imbued with the knowledge and the spirit of poetry; teachers who read aloud well and do much of it; teachers who have learned by heart the joyous, the ardent, the beautiful, the heroic, the pathetic in song and drama and story; teachers who can impel the eyes of children and charm their ears with tone and melody and cadence; teachers who can make the multitude of human passions throb and pulse in youthful hearts and can bear them away on flights of gorgeous imagery. Then will poetry come into its own again.

How illuminating are Bailey's lines:

Poetry is itself a thing of God—
He made his people poets, and the more
We feel of poesy do we become
Like God in love and power;

or Dobson's paraphrase of Gautier:

All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us;
The Bust outlasts the throne,—
The Coin, Tiberius.

Even the gods must go;
Only the lofty Rhyme
Not countless years o'erthrow,—
Nor long array of time.